

# THE REMNANTS OF COLONIALISM IN CONTEMPORARY ARUBAN LITERATURE

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Literature in general provides texts and images that tell us something of the past and the present. In the case of Aruba, this is a past that has its origin in a society that was stratified, where a colonized mind existed, though in which a native language and a literary life was emerging. The literary texts that emerged from such a society sketch a profile of Aruban ways of thinking and behavior. Often it is these texts which give us some insight into a period about which few historical documents have been preserved. From 1845-1948 Aruba belonged to the colony called ‘Curaçao and dependencies.’ In those days the community had no representative body and lived within a fairly passive environment in which a colonial spirit prevailed. During that period of time there was little space for public exchange of views, due to lack of newspapers and other publications that could help stimulate such a process. Most Dutch Caribbean writing from the years 1597-1900 consisted mainly of travelogues focused on Paramaribo and Willemstad. One exceptional work that deals with Aruba is *Reizen in West-Indië* [Travel in the West Indies] by G.B. Bosch dated 1836. This narrative includes a joke told by a Mr. Croes about a Curaçaoan official who was startled when at bedtime his traveling companion took off his wig. The Curaçaoan proceeds to proclaim that “There is that strange gentleman who has become insane and has pulled all the hairs out of his head with his two hands!” The subtitle *The Phenix of Aruba* was more related to two Aruban sisters, Mosa and Johanna Lampe. Mosa, the older of the two sisters wrote letters in the German language and was known for her verses. Their tutor spread the rumor that he would marry his pupil Mosa and this caused her to file a complaint with the Commander. From this short text one can conclude that the sisters came from a family with means, as Mosa spoke a foreign language. At that time, only those who could afford it could hire tutors to teach their children languages and arithmetic. The fact that Mosa had the audacity to complain about her teacher with non-other than the Commander shows the determination of this typically high-spirited Aruban girl. That Mosa wrote verses should be an indication that she was educated in the arts and probably read her work to others – parents, sister or other family members

– as a form of entertainment during family gatherings. It was customary at the time for girls from elite families to show off their talents in this way.

Another such text that mentions Aruba is *De Nederlandsche West-Indische eilanden in derzelver tegenwoordigen toestand* by M.D. Teenstra, which dates back to 1837 (Van Kempen & Rutgers: 143). Among other things, this report makes mention of a 12 year old boy named William Rasmijn who, while tending his flock of sheep, discovered gold in Rooi Fluit. When the boy complained to his father about not having any shoes, the father answered: “you shall have a pair of shoes, as soon as you can earn them yourself.” The father’s answer is typical, because in those times when people depended on agriculture, livestock and fisheries for their livelihood, money to purchase shoes was difficult to come by and children were taught to be independent and self-reliant, that is, as our Aruban elders used to say, “to become strong and stand firm in your shoes.” In the pre-war years, a lively oral literature was still passed on from generation to generation in Aruba. Stories and anecdotes on history, families and remarkable incidents formed the basis for much of the verbal interaction between generations. Mothers were often the main storytellers and they used stories to socialize the children under their care. In this genre, the use of proverbs and sayings featured prominently. Proverbs were used to highlight the values and norms of the community and to educate the young. Proverbs also encapsulate wisdom about life from which one can draw lessons for the future. Examples of such proverbs include *Esun cu colebra morde, ta haya miedo di lagadishi* [Those who are bitten by the snake, become scared of the lizard]. It is remarkable that at present relatively few proverbs and sayings are used in books written for children and young adults in Aruba.

The limited introduction of elementary education in 1845 brought literacy to a slightly broader base of the Aruban population. It took another century before secondary education was established on the island in the form of MULO (lower secondary education) in 1939 and HBS (higher secondary education) in 1949. Due to the late establishment of higher secondary education, the population was for decades to a large extent low-skilled and only a few were prepared for any higher career.

Just as Latin American writers at the beginning of the 19th century felt the need to write about independence, Caribbean writers were engaged with identity and racial issues. Aruban poets of the early 20th century who wrote in Dutch, however, tended to mimic the world and words of the colonizer. Examples of this tendency can be found in the poetry of Johan Karel Lampe (1891-1955). Aruban poetry of the colonial era written in Papiamentu is not different in colour and tone from that of the Romantic era in Europe, especially in its focus on themes of nature and love.

According to historical documents the first evidence of written Papiamentu date from 1769. In Aruba, the Catholic church played a particularly active role in the

development of this language, with the consecration of the Chapel of Alto Vista (built in 1750) and the St. Anna Church in 1772. At the beginning of the 19th century (1804), the island had a population of 1155 (Hartog: 480). All apparently spoke Papiamentu, including the small elite class. Despite its widespread use, an ambivalent attitude toward Papiamentu prevailed in Aruba during colonial times. This less than positive attitude can be attributed not only to the lack of written materials in the language, but also to colonial political structures that placed little value on local Aruban language and culture.

In 1890 Aruba's first newspaper *El Semanario* began to publish in Papiamentu, Spanish and Dutch. This commercially oriented publication appeared on Saturdays, and consisted of four pages full of advertisements and announcements in addition to a drop of news. In these early days, newspapers often discontinued publication after one or two years. The second weekly newspaper *El Faro* (1899-1903), a quadrilingual publication in Papiamentu, Spanish, English and Dutch lasted for four years. *Brisa de Aruba* (1933-1934) and *El Observador* (1935-1938) were newspapers that distinguished themselves for their inclusion of articles in Papiamentu. The well-known Catholic oriented newspapers *La Cruz* (1900) and *La Union* (1933), both published in Papiamentu by the Diocese of Curaçao, were circulated in Aruba over many years.

In the 1950's when radio stations started broadcasting on the island, the use of Papiamentu expanded from the print to the electronic media. Although Dutch was the official language of communication, the widespread use of Papiamentu by the population can be considered to be a form of resistance to colonialism. Partly as a result of this resistance, the 1950s witness the first publication of two works by V.S. Pieterella, *Dora Deana y flornan di amor* and *Dora Deana y su lagrimanan*.

The founding during the 1950s of the magazine *Simadan* with the aim of promoting literary work in Papiamentu in Aruba also embodied such resistance in stark contrast to the Dutch language oriented literary magazine *De Stoep* published in Curaçao. In the three editions of the magazine published in 1950, 1951 and 1960, the pages were filled with the poems of Aruban writers such as Hubert Booi, Nena Bennet and Julio Maduro, who thereby gained a platform for their work.

Contemporary Aruban prose deals with themes such as corruption, environmental issues, social issues and cultural heritage, and the one-dimensional characters of past prose writing in Aruba have given way to characters that are complex and multidimensional. In her short story titled *Chobil y su amigonan Rubiano* [Chobil and his Aruban friends] (Booi et al.: 94-96) Gina Henriquez writes about prejudices among ABC islanders during the 1960s when the Niagara ferry connected the islands. In the story, a Curaçaoan ferry passenger stumbles, falls unconscious and is helped by

an Aruban passenger. Upon regaining consciousness, the Curaçaoan repays this kindness by scolding the Aruban.

In Jose Geerman's short story by *Awacero maishi rabo*, one captures a glimpse of the dire straits experienced by the Aruban peasantry in the 1920s. In the story a violent rainstorm is depicted by the author as a disaster for the peasants, but as a cause for celebration by the children, who see it as a relief from the normally dry conditions on the island.

After *Simadan* other literary magazines emerged in Aruba, including *Chuchubi* (1974-1976), and *Brindis* (1974-1976). These had a restricted impact because they published very few issues over a very short period for a very limited audience. *Chuchubi* was a party-oriented publication which was sometimes regarded as a political pamphlet. *Brindis*, edited by Jossy Mansur and Julio Maduro, focused its articles on local music, folklore and cultural activities, in order to promote Aruban cultural identity, the Papiamentu language, social awareness and the consolidation of a new local cultural elite. *Brindis* published poems by Aruban writers such as Digna Laclé, Julio Maduro, Jossy Mansur, Nena Bennet as well as poems by writers from the other islands like J.C. Provence, Calito Nicolaas and Cecilia (Chichi) Evertz from Bonaire.

In the 1970s and 1980s some progressive teachers took on the task of managing *Skol y Comunidad* magazine, which published among other things, reviews on literature for children and adolescents as well as the work of 1970s generation poets. During this period, Jossy Mansur attempted to shift the historical focus of Arubans from the European Netherlands to their own island with his *Evento, historia y personahe* (1979) and *Punto di vista*.

From the 1980s to the 1990s, Frank Williams published his stories written in Papiamentu in *Regalo di fantasia* (1989), *Alma transparente* (1994) and *E yamada* (1997). In the 1990s two Aruban novels appeared written in Dutch: *Tranen om de Ara* (1998) by Jacques Thönissen and *De zomer van Alejandro Bulos* (1999) by Denis Henriquez.

Although the short stories of Jossy Tromp and Frank Williams differ, they exhibit a certain lack of texture and depth. In *Alma transparente* Frank Williams deals with different aspects of human behaviour and the Compa Nanzi trickster. Most of the stories in this collection are situated primarily in the Dakota district, a migrant community in Aruba during the 1950s and 1960s. In his collection of short stories titled *Un anochi y otro cuentanan Arubiano* (2005) Jossy Tromp focuses on the period of the Second World War and the Noord district as well as the rest of the northern part of Aruba. In the stories Tromp uses some words that are used exclusively in that part of the island. Through the stories of both Tromp and Williams we gain some insight into the ways of thinking and behaviour of Arubans in their day to day lives during the

final days of the colonial period. While these stories at times focus on the relations between Arubans and their Dutch colonial masters, they do not explicitly deal with the contradictions of colonial society, as does much of the prose written in other parts of the Caribbean at the time. From a historical point of view, however, these stories provide important fictional accounts of life on Aruba during a period that remains largely undocumented in the history books.

In 2004 the Papiamentu prose and poetry anthology *Bentana Habri* was published in The Netherlands. This volume launched the work of a new generation Aruban and Antillean authors living as migrants in Europe. Five Aruban writers published ten new short stories there, all of which differ from each other in terms of subject matter, period and location, including Olga Orman's *Campamento durante Pasco* and *Esnan cu no a bolbe*; Richard de Veer's (1929-2014) *Pa cara di*.

The arrival in Aruba of workers from the rest of the Caribbean from the 1930s onward did not immediately give rise to a body of written literature. José Ramón Vicioso from Santo Domingo published his first volume of poetry *Dioramas* in 1938, followed by *Graciela* (1944), *Romance de Pascua de Resurrección y otros the poemas* (1945), *Tríptico del destierro* (1945), *Páginas Arubanas* (1946), *Isla sin bosques* (1964), *Senda de amor* (1966), *Música de Sotavento* (1966), and his final volume *Kadarpélides* (1972). Vicioso left his home every Sunday afternoon for the Sociedad Bolivaria in Oranjestad to share his poetry with other colleagues. His poetry can be best characterised as a profound dialogue with nature. After José Ramón Vicioso, no other immigrant literary figure writing in Spanish has emerged in Aruba.

For the first few decades, English and English-lexifier Creole speaking migrants, while dominant in the refinery workforce, played a lesser role in Aruban literature than they did in Aruban music, perhaps due to the fact that they found themselves somewhat isolated geographically and linguistically on the island (Richardson: 35). It was only in the 1960s-1970s that a new phase commenced for greater participation in Aruban society by second generation immigrants, who began to publish both in Aruba and The Netherlands (Nicolaas: 1990). By the end of the 1970s, the first short story *Distance call* (1978) by Ken Mangroelal and the novel *Witte plaag* (1978) by Angela Matthews appeared. In 1988, Lolita Euson published a volume of mainly religious poetry in the English language titled *Sweet Praises*.

In The Netherlands migrant Aruban writers are making a significant contribution to the survival of Papiamentu literature and are acting as a catalyst for literary cultural activities on the island. In the new millennium, poet Ramon Sharp, dramatist Carmen Herrera, non-fiction writer Yubi Naar and children's author Roland Peterson deserve mention here, inspired in part by the work of writers and poets like Frank Williams, Quito Nicolaas, Dax Hassel, Belén Kock-Marchena, Frida Winklaar and Filomena Wong, who emerged in the 1990s.

Some major breakthroughs have been made in terms of publication in the new millennium: Joan Leslie with *De bloeiende flamboyant* (2007), Irma Grovell with *Kralen uit de Cariben* (2008) and Rosa Arrendell with *Dottie, de kleindochter van de oude slavin* (2008). Only in the short stories of Arrendell does one get a picture of what the migrant experience may have been like on Aruba, including frequent relocations, temporary jobs, exploitation as household servants of the expatriates at the refinery, and coping with life on a minimum wage. Some Netherlands based Aruban writers like Giselle Ecury are writing exclusively in Dutch, while others like Olga Orman, Quito Nicolaas, Frida Winklaar and Joan Leslie are writing both in Papiamentu and Dutch.

To summarize, it can be concluded that while Aruban literature has made great strides forward, Aruban writers and poets, especially those not in the diaspora, tend to be conservative, in the sense that they display a certain reluctance to confront controversial societal issues such as colonialism, racism, gender issues, child abuse, and GLBT issues in their work. Sometimes it seems as if overarching literary currents in the Caribbean area such as Négritude, Antillianité, postcolonialism, feminism and postmodernism haven't as yet had much of an impact on writing in Aruba.

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